9: Ewers E,G-4,5 (1941-1951) 1955 NF6 Blackfoot NF6

HORSE TRAVOIS CONSTRUCTION

Wissler (1910, pp. 88–91, fig. 56) has described and figured the Blackfoot dog travois, made with ladder or net type loading platform. Informants claimed the ladder-type platform was preferred for both dog and horse travois by the Blackfoot. They considered the netted platform a Cree type. The dog and horse travois differed primarily in size, apex construction, and the hitch.

Among the Blackfoot the horse travois was made and owned by women. If a man had several wives, all worked together in making travois. Generally each family made its own. However, the wealthy husband of a woman who was not skilled at this work would get her one in trade. He might give a horse for a travois. Poorer people would pay no more than 4 robes.

The travois was made entirely of wood and rawhide. Figure 18 illustrates the construction, and the travois in place on the horse's back. The shafts (*a* and *a'*) were two stout poles of lodgepole pine. Generally they were obtained from the eastern slope of the Rockies or from the Bear Paw Mountains. They were generally about 4 to 5 inches in diameter at the base, a little larger than lodgepoles, although the Blackfoot referred to these shafts as "lodgepoles." Usually the shafts were made a little longer than necessary to allow for shortening through wear at the base. However, Weasel Tail said the travois would ride better if the distance forward of the tie (*b*) was relatively short. Shafts with long frontal projections (over 3 feet beyond the tie) had little spring. The tie (*b*) generally was made with a wet tendon from the back of the buffalo's neck wrapped with soft-tanned skin rope. The hitch was composed of a flat strip of rawhide (*c*) about 4 fingers wide. Each end of this strip was wrapped under and around one of the shafts, doubled back upon itself and sewn with rawhide cord. Through transverse slits in the center of this rawhide piece was passed a long rawhide line about 2 fingers wide (*d*). One end of this line was carefully and tightly wrapped around each shaft as far down as the bottom edge of the loading platform, where these lines were tied, leaving sufficient length of line to permit the ends to be used for tying the load on the platform. This rawhide line played an important role in the construction of the travois. Actually it carried the weight of the pull in transport and also kept the shafts from splitting. Three Calf pointed out that one could tell the maker's pride in craftsmanship by examining her pole wrapping line. If she had been careful to remove all the buffalo hair from the rawhide with a rock, if she had made the line in one continuous strip, and if she had cut it an even width throughout its length, she was a skilled craftsman. However, if she left bits of buffalo hair clinging to the surface, if she cut the line in uneven width, or if she had tied two or more lines to-

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Ewers
Blackfoot
Indians
Horse
Travois

FIGURE 18.—Construction of a Blackfoot horse travois. *a*, *a'*, Shafts; *b*, forward tie; *c*, rawhide hitch pad; *d*, rawhide hitch and pole wrapping line; *e*, girth strap; *f*, *f'*, rawhide cord saddle ties; *g*, primary struts, loading platform; *h*, secondary struts, loading platform.

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gether she was a lazy or incompetent worker. The Blackfoot referred to the hitch as "my load." In addition to the rawhide pad and pole wrapping line, the hitch included a cinch (*e*) of narrow rawhide rope, tied to one shaft, passed under the horse's belly and tied to the shaft on the other side. This cinch was tight enough to hold the load but not too tight to be uncomfortable to the horse. Two rawhide cords (*f* and *f'*) were wrapped around the shafts, forward of the hitch and tied to the prongs of the saddle to complete the securing of the shafts.

The Blackfoot spoke of the loading platform as "my broad road." It was composed of 2 transverse primary struts made of lodgepole pine, spaced about 20 inches apart (*g*). These struts were notched near each end, fitted over the shafts, and lashed in place with rawhide line. Secondary struts (*h*) of birch or serviceberry were placed about 5 inches apart at right angles to the primary struts. They were lashed underneath the primary struts, by wet tendons from the neck of a buffalo. These secondary struts in many cases were made of pieces of wood in the bark, from which evenly spaced bands of bark were peeled for decorative purposes. The front end of the loading platform generally was less than 2 feet from the horse's tail when the travois was in place.

TRAVOIS ACCESSORIES

The basic travois described above weighed about 50 pounds. Sometimes a cage of bent willows was added to give protection to children, the aged, or puppies carried on the loading platform on hot, sunny days. These willows were arched and tied to the loading platform at the ends and sides. The willow framework was covered with buffalo robes to keep out the sun.

Either a "wood saddle" or "prairie chicken snare saddle" was used on the travois horse. A martingale and crupper were employed to hold the saddle in place. The former was a plain strip of rawhide 3 fingers wide, tied at each end to the pommel prongs. The crupper was also most commonly of plain rawhide, 3 fingers wide, with padded tailpiece. Its forward portion passed under the rear horn of the saddle and tied to the prongs of the front horn (fig. 18).

TRAVOIS ADJUSTMENT AND REPAIR

Generally a travois lasted about a year in service over rough ground. If conditions did not permit making a new travois the loading platform could be loosened and moved forward, or the worn butt ends could be lengthened by taking two shorter pieces of pine or cottonwood, notching each in two places and lashing them to the underside of the travois platform at the primary strut crossings. Each short piece thus served as an extension to one of the old shafts. A make-

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shift travois could be constructed of cottonwood poles if no lodgepole pine was handy. However, cottonwood generally was considered too easily split to make good travois shafts. It is noteworthy that the Blackfoot never developed any method of capping or binding the base ends of travois shafts to prevent wear and splintering.

CARE OF THE TRAVOIS IN CAMP

Horse travois, like dog travois, sometimes were piled together in conical piles, base ends down, to keep dogs from chewing at the leather parts. More commonly, each travois was propped at an angle, base end down, by a single long pole support, as illustrated by the early photograph, plate 5, *a*. It could then be used as a stage for drying meat, or as a sun shelter covered with buffalo robes or skins, that could be turned with the daily movement of the sun. Beaver and medicine pipe bundle owners generally leaned their travois against the back of the lodge in order to hang their sacred bundles upon them during the day. The travois served women as a step-ladder in the erection and taking down of the lodge. A woman leaned it against the front of the lodge and climbed upon the loading platform to place or extract the topmost pins used to hold the lodge cover together.

SURVIVAL OF THE HORSE TRAVOIS

The Government began to issue wagons to the Montana Blackfoot prior to 1893. In that year Agent Steele reported the issuance of 35 wagons, and added that about 30 were then in use by the Indians of that reservation (U. S. Comm. Ind. Affairs, 1893, p. 172). In the following year Captain Cooke, the new agent, issued 150 wagons, believing that all heads of families were then provided with these vehicles. However, he stated that the wagons issued were not suitable for the service required of them (U. S. Comm. Ind. Affairs, 1894, p. 160). My informants recalled that those early Government issue wagons were narrow gage, with thin spokes like a buggy and of rather weak construction. They would not stand the hard treatment the Indians gave them. The inadequacy of these wagons, combined with poor roads, often muddy and deeply rutted, encouraged the retention of the travois until the 20th century. Wissler (1910, pp. 88–91) mentioned travois use in the first decade of this century for hauling wood. Joseph Sherburne recalled that the Indians brought travois to Browning to haul food and supplies from the traders' stores until 1902 or 1904. Ceremonial use by the medicine woman in the Piegan Sun Dance survived until at least 1909 (personal communication from the late Walter McClintock). In recent years horse travois have been made for display in the Fourth of July parade at Browning and have occasionally been employed for hauling wood in rough country where wagons could not be used. Reuben and Cecile